**God Establishes Jacob’s Family**

Genesis 29:1-30:24

Key Verse Genesis 29:35 – *“She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “This time I will praise the Lord.” So she named him Judah.”*

After many weeks, we now return our study of Genesis. When we last left off, Jacob had been recently sent away by his father Isaac for two reasons. One was in order that Jacob could finally find a wife and start a family of his one while the second was to keep him safe from Esau’s murderous rage due to how Jacob stole his birthright (Genesis 27). One can only imagine what Jacob must have felt as he made the journey to Paddan Aram. He was a man content with living among the tents, in the loving presence of his mother Rebekah. He really trusted in his smarts and resourcefulness to solve any kind of problem he encountered. But now he had to flee for his very life on a 900 kilometer trek to a land he had never been in search of relatives he had never met... all on his own. However, along the way at Bethel, God visited Jacob in a dream, promising him that He would be with Jacob wherever he went and would bless him greatly through his descendants (28:10-15). It was at that moment that Jacob personally accepted God as his own God for the very first time in his life, not simply seeing God as the God of his father and grandfather (28:20-22).

Eventually, Jacob arrived at a well in the open country where he encountered a group of shepherds with their flocks of sheep. Curious, Jacob inquired where there were from to which the shepherds replied they were from Harran and knew of Jacob’s uncle Laban. What good fortune Jacob must have thought to himself. Surely God must have been keeping his promise to him. Yet, all this would pale in comparison to what happened next. Look at verse 9, **“While he was still talking with them, Rachel came with her father’s sheep, for she was a shepherd.”** As Jacob gazed at the stunningly beautiful daughter of Laban, it was love at first sight. If Jacob was even the slightest bit unsure of God’s leading beforehand, the transfixing vision of Rachel must have removed all doubt. She had to be “The One”! In an effort to woo her, he immediately sprang into action by rolling away the heavy stone and watered all her sheep by himself, a scene reminiscent of what his own mother Rebekah did many years earlier (24:19-21). Jacob then proceeded to kiss Rachel and began to weep aloud, probably due a mixture of his joy of finally finding her and sorrow over all the hardships he faced thus far (29:11). Rachel then told her father Laban, who then welcomed Jacob and listened intently as Jacob related everything to him (29:13).

After a month in Laban’s household, Laban asked Jacob to work for him and gave Jacob the opportunity to name his price. However, Jacob was not interested in any ordinary wage. Instead, he wanted Rachel as his wife and was willing to work seven years for her hand in marriage. To most people, this decision makes no sense. Wouldn’t it be better to make good money for seven years and find someone else than to work all those years for no other reward except Rachel? Doing all this would mean he’d have her but nothing else to show for it! Here we see Jacob’s greatest attribute; his determination. Jacob could give his very life to get the one thing he wanted. He wound up investing 14 years of his life to get Rachel (29:30). Many people today are extremely cautious and calculating about everything. They are afraid to risk anything. They avoid making any kind of serious commitment or truly invest themselves in many aspects of life like relationships, school, work or the ministry because they are afraid they will get too involved and risk a great loss if something goes wrong. We need to remember that in Jesus, our work is not in vain. Instead of thinking of what we may lose, we should focus our eyes on all the ways we are already richly blessed along the way as we press on to our true goal in Christ Jesus (Matthew 6:33, Philippians 3:14). And much like how Jacob felt about those seven years in service for Rachel (29:20), our own service will feel only like for a few days for we are serving our Lord not out of duty but out of love.

Amidst all the romance, trouble soon reared in its ugly head for when the time came for Jacob to consummate his marriage to Rachel, Uncle Laban had devised a devious plan to deceive him into marrying Leah and hopefully deduct even more wages from Jacob. Look at verse 25, **“When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn’t I? Why have you deceived me?”** In the same way Jacob tricked Isaac by pretending to be his brother Esau, Jacob got a taste of his own medicine when Leah pretended to be her sister Rachel and how bitter the medicine must have tasted. The deceiver has now become the deceived! Amazingly, Jacob resolved himself to work another seven years in order to marry Rachel (29:30). While some may see this as God’s punishment for wronging Esau, God would use this incident to teach Jacob many spiritual lessons throughout his years in Laban’s household, eventually making Jacob prosperous both in terms of possessions and, as we shall see throughout the remainder of the passage, in terms of descendants.

Before we continue, let us stop for a moment and think about the forgotten party in all this, Leah. Poor Leah! Imagine how hard it was to be her. Contrary to popular belief, Leah wasn’t necessarily ugly. Even her perceived flaw was that she had weak or delicate eyes. Middle Eastern cultures often saw the eyes as a reflection of one’s character or qualities so she may have also been timid or reserved as well. There wasn’t anything wrong with her per se but when compared to her beautiful sister Rachel, she was a distant second. It’s like comparing me to a young Brad Pitt. Jacob’s love solely belonged to Rachel to the point where even Moses (the author of Genesis) described God viewing Leah as being unloved. Clearly she was unwanted and seeing the way Jacob lavished all his affections on Rachel must have felt like a dagger to the heart. But God saw that Leah was unloved. He saw her pain, loneliness, and heartache. Leah, though unloved by Jacob, was deeply loved by God and He blessed her through her children. Yet, as we shall see, Leah still had many more wounds in need of healing.

When her first son Reuben (meaning “he has seen my misery; see a son”) was born, she thought that her husband would love her. But nothing changed. Her second son, Simeon, also brought hope that Jacob would love her (Simeon means, "he hears"). Her third son, Levi (“attached”) again brought hope that her husband would become attached to her. But Jacob's heart was not moved. Leah was sorrowful. She must have felt even more jealous of her sister who had totally captured her husband's heart. Leah had thought that if she bore sons for her husband he would love her, but it didn't work. Things like that never work. She must had cried many bitter tears filled with rejection, jealousy and loneliness in her heart. However, a dramatic change took place in Leah when her fourth son was born.

May we read verse 35, **“She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “This time I will praise the Lord.” So she named him Judah.”** In naming him Judah, which means “praise,” Leah made a decision. In seeing how God had blessed her with another child, Leah’s cold and wounded heart began to thaw and open, letting the love of God inside. Rather than be consumed by her thirst for her husband's love, she gave sincere thanks and praise to God in spite of her situation for she experienced how God loved her in ways no husband or family ever could. Higher than mountains and deeper than oceans, God's love goes beyond all measure. It is the only love that truly satisfies. God’s love has the power to transform our inner most being and our desires (Psalm 37:4) to the point where all we can do is praise Him. Worship will always take your eyes off your human pain and will place your focus on the God who makes all things new. When Leah decided to praise the Lord, she gave birth to a son from whose lineage would come remarkable men, great kings and ultimately, the Promised Messiah.

Like Leah we all, to some extent, bear the same scars and feelings of being unloved. But God is right now inviting you to experience His divine love in all its fullness. What does that look like? The remainder or Leah’s children provide a hint. Later, Leah named the two sons which her maidservant bore Gad (“good fortune”) and Asher (“happy”). She became a happy woman. Later, she bore Jacob two more sons: Issachar (“God rewarded me”) Zebulun (“honor”) and a daughter Dinah (“justice”), their names a clear embodiment of all that God’s love had done for her. I pray that we may accept God’s love and be able to praise Him whole-heartedly like Leah.

There was one Korean missionary who was born to a family with 10 daughters. Her parents were really disappointed because they wanted a son. Besides, she was weak and sickly and they thought that she would die soon so they did not even give her a name for a long time. She felt unloved and unwanted. In her attempts to make herself loved by her parents, she excelled in school and became very prosperous but it did not give her any joy. It was only when she accepted God's divine love for her in Jesus Christ, she felt loved and found her true joy, allowing her to give her life for the sake of helping others experience that same love and joy that she did.

Conversely, Rachel life was full of misery. As much as she was renowned for her exterior beauty, inwardly she did not bear the same spiritual qualities to match. Though she met her husband in a manner similar to her mother-in-law Rebekah, in almost every other way Rachel was the opposite of Rebekah who though beautiful as well, was celebrated more for her inner beauty shown in her strength, prayerfulness and great faith. It is a Proverbs 31:30 states, “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” Rachel wanted children but rather than pray, she complained to Jacob, **"Give me children or I'll die"** (30:1). Jacob's response should have pointed Rachel to God, but she did not accept it. He rebuked her, saying, **"Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?"** (30:2) yet Rachel did not seek God. Sadly, she made the same mistake as Sarah did by giving her maidservant Bilhah to Jacob and asked him to have children by her. She used Bilhah as a surrogate mother for two sons. The names she gave these sons reflect the inner bitterness in her heart. One was Dan, which means "vindicate", and the other Naphtali, meaning "struggle or wrestle"… in reference to her contentious relationship with Leah. Rachel only thought about doing everything in her power to maintain her superiority over her sister (30:3-8). Finally, God gave Rachel a beautiful son, Joseph. Jacob loved him most, for he was Rachel's son. It would be this favouritism that would ultimately become the cause of great sorrow and the source of great blessing in the house of Jacob. But even when Rachel bore her son, she was not happy or thankful. She named him Joseph, which means "May the Lord [Yahweh] give me another son." She seemed to never truly happy or satisfied. God would eventually give her another son, but at a terrible cost for Rachel would subsequently lose her life in the birth of her son Benjamin (35:16-18).

Now let us make a few things very clearly. Much like his grandfather before him, Jacob went against God’s original design for marriage in favour of adopting the local customs of having multiple wives, the consequences of which would be most painfully seen in the life of Joseph. And we have seen how often Jacob’s determination has been both a source of great strength and even greater weakness in his attempt to carve out a life for himself. However, through his experiences in Paddan Aram, we shall see how God trains Jacob for 20 years to teach him humility and total reliance upon Him. Through adversity and in spite of much personal difficulty, God would keep His promise. In the amazing and all-surpassing wisdom of God, Jacob is being prospered by God at the very same time he is being disciplined by God. The result? Jacob’s household and his 12 sons would become the very foundations of the nation Israel. It would be through Judah, the child of praise, whom Jesus Christ would descend from, fulfilling God’s promise to Jacob that all peoples on the earth would be blessed through his descendant (28:14).

To conclude, we have witnessed how great God is in using such flawed people and a terrible situation for His own glory. Though disappointments and heartaches happen throughout life, in Christ they are all transformed into something that can serve as a source of fulfilment, joy and life. As the Apostle Paul declares, “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God” (Rom. 8:28). If we continue to love God, even the worst in life can be bravely faced as God takes all we pass through and, in His redemptive power, works it for our very best!